

# People

## Children's Crusader Saving troubled kids

*Scott Hollander helped inspire TV's "The Guardian"*

By Richard Jerome Liza Hamm

November 18, 2002

Donald Powell's life began careening out of control after his parents' divorce. By the time he was 16 he had lashed out at his mother, he says, by stealing her credit card and spending \$1,000. He landed in two Pittsburgh juvenile group homes. After a year an aunt and uncle took him in and they moved to Southern California, but when he clashed with them, he ran off to live with a friend's parents. "They made me feel loved," he says. Peace, however, was fleeting. In 1999, during his senior year of high school, his uncle dragged him back to Pittsburgh—and another youth shelter. "People there were crazy," says Powell, now 19. "One kid screamed obscenities at night. I shared a room with a heroin addict."

Yet within 10 days, Powell was back in the nurturing custody of his friend's folks—thanks to a former corporate lawyer named Scott Hollander. Three years ago Hollander took the reins of KidsVoice, a nonprofit organization offering free legal services to children who wind up in court because of alleged neglect or abuse. One of just a handful of such programs across the U.S., KidsVoice—whose staff of 41 includes social workers and other child-care experts—serves 5,000 Pittsburgh-area kids a year. In Powell's case Hollander persuaded a judge to cut red tape requiring at least a three-month wait before the teen could live with the California family. Says the former runaway, now living on his own and attending community college: "It was awesome."

If Powell's story sounds like something out of TV's *The Guardian*, that's no coincidence: Hollander, 39, helped inspire the hit CBS series about child advocates. In fact, his younger brother David was the show's creator. "I've always been extraordinarily proud of what he does," says David, 34. Like Hollander, the series' lead character Nick Fallin (played by Simon Baker) is an ex-corporate attorney—but Fallin was forced into helping kids as community service for a drug bust. "When I saw the script, I thought, 'Oh man, I don't like that—why couldn't this be about people in my office who make great choices?'" says Hollander, who serves as the show's technical consultant. "But it didn't take me long to figure out that's not great drama."

The work KidsVoice does is compelling enough. On a recent day in court, one of the organization's lawyers soothed a terrified boy of 6 as he awaited placement in a foster home. Another noticed that a girl the same age, whose mother was in jail, was squinting as her grandmother requested a continuance of parental rights; the attorney asked the judge to order an eye exam. "Their goal is not to become millionaires," says Arlene Rittiger, 47, whom KidsVoice helped to adopt a foster daughter. "They have hearts."

Hollander's has always been oversize. Growing up in Pittsburgh with David and sister Leslie, now 37, an actress, "he befriended the kid who was stuttering or who couldn't throw well," recalls his father, Thomas, 66, a prominent attorney. The summer after his freshman year at Tufts University, Hollander worked at a Pittsburgh daycare center for abused children. "That touched me," he says. "I thought this was the kind of work I wanted to do."

Still, Hollander was unfocused after earning a degree in English, social psychology and American studies in 1985. He dabbled in journalism and construction, then entered law school at the University of Michigan. Graduating in 1990, he joined an elite Seattle firm but found the job less than fulfilling. When his mother, Barbara, a family therapist, died of cancer at 54 in 1993, “it was a wake-up call that life is short,” says Hollander. “It’s really important to do things you like to do.”

So he took a 50 percent pay cut to work as an attorney for a Denver child-advocacy group. In 1999 he was wooed to run Pittsburgh’s struggling Legal Aid for Children. Hollander raised enough money to triple his staff and renamed the group KidsVoice. His success attests to his persuasiveness. Says Teo Fila, 41, his wife of five years and mother of 7-month-old Delilah: “He can talk to anybody.” Hollander vows that KidsVoice will grow larger still— and that’s where the TV version of his enterprise comes in handy.

“When I make a pitch for money, it used to take me a long time to explain why kids need lawyers,” Hollander says. “Now they say, ‘Oh, like The Guardian.’ People watch the show and get a sense of how we can really make a difference in the life of a child.”

—Richard Jerome —Liza Hamm in Pittsburgh